Tarzan vs. IBM: Humans and Computers in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville*

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In contrast with the utopian perspectives on science and technology that pervaded much of the discourse concerning computers in the 1960s, Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* [*Alphaville, une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*] (1965) explores an alternative, humanist critique of technology—albeit one necessarily realized, and therefore complicated, by the technics of cinema. With the development and rapid proliferation of the computer, the notion that advanced technology might fundamentally alter our existence gained increasing currency, leading to a polarization of perspectives, from the technophilic to the technophobic. Where the likes of Marshall McLuhan and Buckminster Fuller generally, if not always, celebrated the utopian potential of the "extensions of man" (McLuhan 1964) and proposed a new "operating manual for spaceship Earth" (Fuller 1969), Godard speculated on the potentially catastrophic uses of the computer to enslave rather than liberate humanity.

Central to this vision is the projection of a technocratic state. In this sense, *Alphaville* exists as a realization of what theorist Jacques Ellul described as "the technological society" (1964), in which machines underpin an ideology founded on the prioritization of technical and scientific knowledge. Extending the humanist critique of such a society—

–a position espoused in various hues by Ellul, Lewis Mumford (1934, 1967, 1970), Herbert Marcuse (1964, 1969), and others—Godard's film portrays the tragedy of a future in which rationality, organization, predictability, and efficiency—qualities popularly associated with the pre-personal computer—have triumphed over individuality, emotion, spontaneity, and creativity.

In such a schema, the computer of *Alphaville* is defined in contrast to the very essence of humanity. Godard's film invokes what Ted Nelson described as "the myth of the 'computer,'" (2) part of an early culture—epitomized by IBM—that sought to cloister this machine within the rarified realms of specialist institutions, guarded over by a technical elite. The domination of humans by the technocratic state, served and administered by a powerful computer network, becomes, for Godard, a means of interrogating the qualities that distinguish humans from computers, by way of the broader ideological and philosophical frameworks in which this relationship finds meaning. What, *Alphaville* asks, does it mean to be human? What roles are better served by machines, such as the computer? Faced with the rapid rise of computers (and the qualities associated with this technology), are humans (and humanism) ultimately doomed to obsolescence?

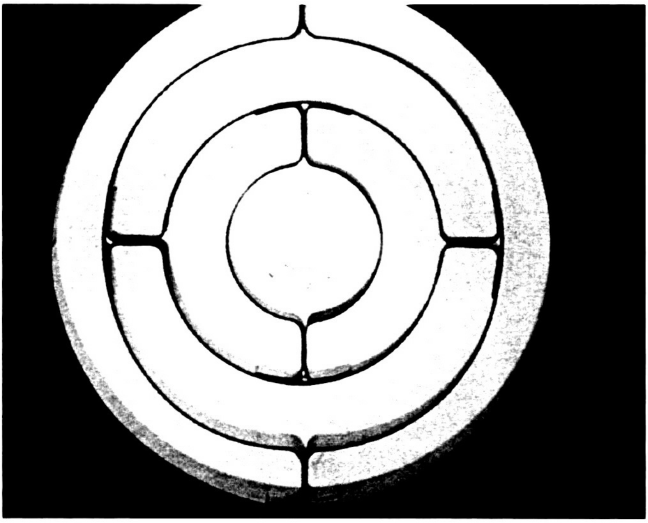
Such questions have been posed throughout history—not least in cinema, in representations as iconic as the dehumanizing technology of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and Charles Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), which explore what it means to be human in an era dominated by machines—but assumed a renewed sense of urgency in relation to the increasingly powerful and intelligent computers of the digital age. *Alphaville* both recalls the themes of earlier films, concerned with the dehumanized body and omnipresent machines, and extends toward the distinctive questions of consciousness and conscience evoked by the rise of the computer.

The Technological Society

In negotiating the material and discursive conditions of its historical moment, *Alphaville* depicts a world in which absolute faith is placed in scientific and technical knowledge, a philosophy that finds its zenith in the form of the supercomputer Alpha 60. In terms of plot, secret agent Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine) is sent to Alphaville to rescue fellow agent Henry Dickson (Akim Tamiroff, credited as "Akim Tamirof") and bring back or kill Professor von Braun (Howard

Vernon), designer of the Alpha 60 and arch technocrat in this city of the future. Human residents such as von Braun's daughter Natasha (played by Anna Karina, Godard's wife at the time), whom Caution eventually falls in love with, have submitted to the computer's rule, subordinating their essential humanity in the process. Alpha 60, in alliance with the professor, programs and controls their existence. Natasha's position is seemingly that of many others, yet Caution sees in her, in particular, the hope of emotional salvation.

Like much of science fiction, *Alphaville* employs the appearance of a futuristic abstraction—what Claudia Springer describes as "a clean slate, or a blank screen, onto which we can project our fascination and fears" (322)—to negotiate contemporary developments and discourses. The fictional Alpha 60, for example, has revealing roots in the historical world. Most explicitly, this machine was modeled on the Gamma 60,[1] first announced by the Compagnie des Machines Bull in 1958.[2] The Gamma 60 was seen as a large-scale processor to rival US imports—such as IBM's 705, RCA's 301, and Remington Rand's UNIVAC 1—from established competitors. In total, twenty units were manufactured. Customers included Electricité de France—whose headquarters and facilities feature in Godard's film as the central complex that houses the computer network's core[3]—and the SNCF national railways.



The fictional supercomputer Alpha 60 visually represented by a flashing light.

Mass computerization occurred against a backdrop of discourse concerning the role of the individual within society—from state policy concerning systems of governance to the intellectual shift away from existentialism, an influence on Godard, toward the structuralist movement and its general disinterest in human agency. The intertwined realms of technology and technocracy, in particular, played a major role in the modernization of postwar France. The ascendancy of technocracy, according to Kristin Ross, "was especially visible after 1958 when [Charles] de Gaulle consolidated his return to power surrounded by, for the first time, an elite and overt entourage of *ministres-techniciens*" (178), with even presidential power devolved to discrete areas of technical and in turn technological expertise.

In this context, in functioning as a symbol of centralized reason and control, Alpha 60 illustrates the complex relationship that exits between technology, the computer as material embodiment, and technocracy, an ideological system that often utilizes machines but is not necessarily predicated on their application. Although intimately related, technology and technocracy are neither synonymous nor mutually dependent. For Ellul, "the machine is the most obvious, massive, and impressive example of technique, and historically the first" (3), but is not the only one. In the context of the mid-twentieth century, he argued, "technique has now become almost completely independent of the machine" (4). This larger phenomenon, technique–—"la technique" in Ellul's original—consists of "nothing more than *means* and the *ensemble of means*" (19), the collective principles, impulses, and workings of *all* individual techniques, which are used to achieve any end whatsoever, whether by machine or otherwise.

What Ellul described as the technological society is dominated by logic, the technical pursuit of which becomes an end in its own right; and, in the case of technocracy, an explicitly articulated ideology—one quite distinct from Ellul's own brand of humanism, rooted in religious thinking. Such a society is founded on technique, technicians, technicism, and, as an extension of these expressions, the more traditional understanding of technology as physical tools or machines. In all aspects of life, human impulses are necessarily redirected into expressions and behaviors that are more deliberate and rationalized, with citizens transformed into dehumanized components of a larger technical system.

Ellul was not alone in warning of such a scenario. Mumford, likewise, described a society increasingly seen as taking on the qualities of machines—though this was a process, he argued, that had been occurring for hundreds of years. "Within the last four centuries," he wrote in 1970, "the older tradition of polytechnics," which enlists many different modes of technology as a framework for solving human problems, "was replaced by a system that gave primacy to the machine, with its repetitive motions, its depersonalized processes, its abstract quantitative goals" (164). This new system, which he termed "technics," was based on technology for its own sake, as opposed to human utility.

The world portrayed by Godard exists as a fictional variation on Mumford's "technics" and Ellul's "technological society," in which Alpha 60 and Professor von Braun have conditioned the population to deny the existence of human freedom. As Caution enters the city, he is greeted with a sign—"ALPHAVILLE. SILENCE. LOGIC. SECURITY. PRUDENCE"[4]—that offers an appropriate credo for a society maintained by a multitude of technical processes. The city is split into two zones, North and South, the climates of which are carefully maintained, so that one produces perpetual sun, the other perpetual snow. No parameter of Alphaville's existence, not even the weather, extends beyond the harness of science and technology.

The movements of residents are also carefully monitored by the state, with numbers imprinted onto the bodies of certain individuals as a way of collapsing identity into numerical data, more easily stored and monitored by the computer. Ironically, this function mirrors the intended use of the initial purchase of the first commercially available digital computer, the UNIVAC 1, by the US Census Bureau in 1951.[5] "People have become slaves to probability," Caution laments. To which, Dickson responds, "here at Alphaville their ideal is ... a pure technocracy ... an entirely technical society ... like those of ants and termites!" In the same way that the joyous shifts of changing seasons are replaced by meteorological monotony, individual expressions are outlawed, banned for being both irrational and inefficient.

Scientists and mathematicians, by contrast, are deified as the embodiment of technical expertise. Such figures are memorialized in the naming of streets—at one point, Caution is directed to "Heisenberg Boulevard, on the corner of Mathematics Park"—and mathematical formulae, such as Albert Einstein's $E=mc^2$, are intercut throughout the film. In this way, Godard emphasizes the primacy of science and mathematics as defining discourses, visually punctuating the film's action with the precise rationale for the world we have entered, in which individual conscience is sublimated by a collective faith in elite technicians.

While the likes of Ellul saw the technological society as "a universal concentration camp" (427), a view seemingly shared by Godard, others pointed to the progressive potential of advanced technology, including the computer, as a means of addressing the world's major problems. Fuller proposed a new harmony between technology and the Earth's ecology. "Man is going to be displaced altogether as a specialist by the computer" (44), he noted, recalling the argument espoused by Ellul, but with an altogether different end result. "The computer is an imitation human brain. There is nothing new about it, but its capacity, speed of operation, and tirelessness, as well as its ability to operate under environmental conditions intolerable to the human anatomy, make it far more effective in performing special tasks than is the skull and tissue encased human brain, minus the computer" (112-13). Given these qualities, he suggested, demonstrating a degree of faith in the progress of technology, "all politicians can and will yield enthusiastically to the computers [sic] safe flight-controlling capabilities in bringing all of humanity in for a happy landing" (132-33). This scenario stands in stark contrast to the catastrophe—or crash landing, to extend Fuller's metaphor—depicted in *Alphaville*.

McLuhan, likewise, often in opposition to those who sought to critique advanced technology, saw the computer and other modern electronic media as pivotal tools. "The computer," he and Quentin Fiore argued, "is by all odds the most extraordinary of all the technological clothing ever devised by man, since it is the extension of our central nervous system" (35). The computer was perceived as an amplification of humanity, as opposed to a means of suppressing the essentially human. Although this position can and has been critiqued,[6] McLuhan's ideas—and their reception, where ambivalence was often overlooked in favor of evangelical zeal—remain useful in revealing the utopian rhetoric of the period.

Although there is no evidence to suggest that Godard was aware of the writings of Mumford, Ellul, Fuller, or McLuhan, *Alphaville* nevertheless explores the fundamental merits or otherwise of a world increasingly rooted in technics, technocracy, and the technological society.

The Computer as Technocratic Tool

Alpha 60, in particular, is the symbolic locus for this exploration, with the material tools that sustain such a society central to its workings. In Godard's fiction, the computer both implements and perpetuates von Braun's regime. Comprising 1.4 billion nerve centers, it is, Dickson describes, "a giant computer ... like the ones we used to have, you know? ... Olivetti ... General Electric ... Alpha 60 is the same, but a hundred and fifty light years stronger." This processing power is used to dictate every parameter of existence. The computer calculates and programs the everyday lives of the population, applying scientific and technical thinking to instill and maintain order, founded on the notion that such principles can lead to a more efficient society than can otherwise be achieved.

In visual terms, Alpha 60 and its networked nodes are most frequently represented through an abstraction, a visual binary created by a recurring flashing light that functions as proxy signification. The gray streets of the city, depicted in black and white by celebrated cinematographer Raoul Coutard, sharply contrast with the blinding lights of the electronic nerve centers, whose intermittent flashing exercises a hypnotic spell. This blinking—on, off; a corollary of binary code—gives presence to the sprawling machine.

While real computer hardware of the time—whirring magnetic tape, racks of wired components, control panels, and so on—is revealed when Caution tours the Control Center that houses the inner workings of Alpha 60, Godard's favored representation of the computer is deliberately archaic. "By representing a computer advanced enough to wage atomic war on the world with a single lamp," Harun Farocki has noted in highlighting this paradox, "*Alphaville* signals its allegiance to those low-budget films in which an ordinary table plate designates a single flying saucer" (59). The power of the machine is signified through its seeming omnipresence, as opposed to sophisticated architecture.

In terms of the film's sound track, the pervasiveness of Alpha 60—both its voice and electronic emissions can reach any citizen, any time, in any part of the city—is signified through a number of sonic devices. At the Control Center, the computers whirr. Elsewhere, Alpha 60's flashing light is accompanied by a Morse code-like electronic bleep. The computer's spoken voice, meanwhile, is typically dissociated from any apparent source. It becomes an ethereal presence, permeating the world as a sonic signifier of the ruling technocracy. In terms of timbre, the voice is distressed and distorted. Ironically, this seemingly synthetic voice was provided by a human, a man who had lost his voice box and learned to speak again. According to Richard Roud, in introducing Godard's screenplay, the director wanted "not a mechanical voice, but one which has been, so to speak, killed" (12). Emblematic of the film as a whole, Alpha 60 exists as the corollary of a loss of consciousness.

The computer slaves tirelessly, calculating the permutations, probabilities, and parameters of its society, their mathematical underpinnings, and the individual's role within the larger whole. "One must not be afraid of logic," Caution is instructed. "The function of Alpha 60," he discovers, "is the prediction of the data which Alphaville obeys," a description in keeping with Godard's original notion, as outlined in his treatment, of a machine "whose work consists in recording in its thousand memories the behaviour of everybody and everything ... with tasks like the departure of trains and aeroplanes, the traffic, the distribution of electricity, the repression of crime, etc." (92-95). After all, Caution hears, "in the life of all individuals, as well as in the lives of nations themselves, everything is determined by cause and effect." The implication is that just as a powerful computer might calculate the organization of society, so too might it determine the interior life of each individual.

In this sense, though not fully developed or articulated—certainly not to the extent of later films such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which *Alphaville* anticipates—Alpha 60 embodies a degree of intelligence. Not only does this machine implement the technical systems designed by Professor von Braun, it also learns by performing complex calculations and analyzing their output. The society of Alphaville, Caution notes, "has developed itself at lightning speed, by following the orders of its electronic brains, which at the same time have developed themselves by creating problems beyond the range of the human mind." Through such methods, implemented at the Control Center, Alpha 60 predetermines the conditions of existence. The machine controls transport, the supply of electricity, military operations, and even the movement of goods and people, identifying the most efficient techniques for maintaining each of these elements and their relation to the workings of society.

When it dawns on Alpha 60 that its capabilities have transcended the technical potential of the human brain, the logical ramification of this evolution becomes the computer's subjugation of its human progenitors. Yet, Alpha 60 points to a higher order, the self-perpetuating pursuit of ever-greater technique—à la Ellul's technological critique—as the ultimate rationale for this coup d'état. "Do not believe that it is I ... who elicits this destruction ... nor the scientists who have accepted the plan," Alpha 60 asserts. "Ordinary men are unworthy of the position they occupy in the world. An analysis of their past draws one automatically to this conclusion. Therefore, they must be destroyed, which is to say, transformed." In resisting this scenario, the computer argues, humanity denies its logical and therefore inevitable subordination.

This process of "transformation," the creation of a world akin to the technological society that Ellul and others feared was emerging in the historical world, suggests a fundamental loss of humanity to the rational logic of the computer. For Ellul, humans were already becoming more like machines, manifesting the "man-machine" (395), a dehumanized entity that epitomizes this loss of agency. Under the direction of Alpha 60, humanity is effectively mechanized, with individuals programmed to behave as machines.

Expressions of love, for example, are alien to the computer and therefore outlawed. The capacity to love is not only a distraction to ordered existence but is actively forbidden, to the point where the very notion has been forgotten. "No one ever falls in love with you?" Caution asks Natasha, to which she replies, "In love? What's that?" Dickson, meanwhile, in his dying throes, is unabashed in his expressions, courting his erotic partner with amorous platitudes, spoken in several languages. Yet, this exchange is rendered deviant, an act of prostitution. In Alphaville, Dickson can proclaim his love, but only as an illicit fetish, a perversion serviced by a professional seductress.

Elsewhere, the computer's rule determines what words are listed within an evolving dictionary, referred to as the Bible, which is placed in every room and pored over with the type of reverence typically reserved for religious texts. This semantic control results in the banishment from consciousness of a series of words—including "conscience" and "why" ("One never says 'why,' but 'because,'" admonishes one engineer), which suggest a questioning of existence, in general, and the ideological underpinnings of society, in particular, as well as “redbreast,” “weeping,” and “tenderness,” which convey emotion—deemed antithetical to the logic of scientific and technical control. Words disappear nearly every day as part of this regulated lexicon, replaced by others more in keeping with the technocratic regime, while armed guards watch over the Institute of General Semantics, with language deployed as an ideological weapon.

Natasha von Braum (Anna Karina) reading Paul Èl.

Ironically, not only is centralized rule shared between the alliance of von Braun and Alpha 60—the machine itself does not govern, though its calculations are obeyed by the residents of Alphaville—this control is largely the result of consensual submission, albeit in the face of sometimes brutal oppression. “Outsiders have been assimilated wherever possible,” Caution reports. “The others, who could not adapt, were purely and simply put to death.” The majority of residents submit willingly to, or are unable to resist, the advances of this society.

Ellul described such individuals, in the historical world, “who have so completely renounced the inner life as to hurl themselves gladly and without regret into a completely technicized mode of being,” as "joyous robots" (411). Under the rule of the computer, calculations are used to determine efficient systems that keep the population employed, fed, and clothed. These "joyous robots" have everything they could wish for—except, of course, their freedom.

Those who resist face a weary existence, perennially on the run from Professor von Braun and the omnipresent Alpha 60, a machine that sees, hears, and pinpoints those who contest its authority. Enrico Fermi, a bastion for poetry, is a hideout for those who resist the state. Suicide, for many, becomes the only alternative to the regime. Others are apprehended and executed in elaborate public rituals, shot on a swimming pool diving board, then stabbed to death by a team of synchronized executioners who conduct their capital punishment in water to the polite applause of those who gather to witness and condone this punitive spectacle. The crimes of those who are executed? They are deemed to have "behaved illogically," as one technical expert puts it; that is, to have resisted the fundaments of the technological society.

Yet, even in the face of execution, some resistors remain steadfast, articulating the type of humanist critique espoused by Ellul and others. "In order to create life, it is merely necessary to advance in a straight line towards all that we love," cries one—a refrain repeated by Natasha near the climax of the film as her own emotions are aroused—moments before he is executed for grieving the death of his wife. "We see the truth that you no longer see," beseeches another. "This truth is, that there is nothing true in man except love and faith, courage and tenderness, generosity and sacrifice"—qualities defined in opposition to those of Alpha 60.

The Myth of the Computer

Godard's working title for *Alphaville*, "Tarzan vs. IBM," points explicitly to this symbolic opposition between humans and computers, a polarization drawn between heroic humanity, exemplified by the primitivism of Tarzan, on the one hand, and the predominant force in the 1960s computing industry, IBM, on the other. Where Tarzan once fought the perils of the jungle,[7] Caution now battles the dehumanizing forces of Alphaville, going head to head with Alpha 60 and the technological society it underpins. The Paris of the 1960s is transformed into the futuristic jungle of Alphaville's cityscape, with Alpha 60, in Godard's original treatment, "a type of machine one hundred thousand times more perfect but analogous in principle to the computers already in use ... in companies like IBM, General Electric, etc." (87).

IBM, in particular, is implicitly positioned as the equivalent of the elite technicians of Alphaville, with their computers the collective corollary of Alpha 60. The reputation of IBM in the 1960s, as Ted Nelson has noted—arguing in 1974 in favor of a shift toward personal computing—was one of guarded hegemony, a collective of programmers, engineers, operators, and other experts who controlled access to their machines. In making his plea for "computer lib" (1-69), Nelson went so far as to describe the global computer giant as "Big Brother" (52), the "International Brotherhood of Magicians" (52), part of the "computer priesthood" (2), and even the "Institute of Black Magic" (52), remonstrating that computers were being unnecessarily mythified by those who worked at IBM.

This myth, to which Godard's film contributes, portrays the computer as symbolically opposed to humanity. "Man has created the myth of 'the computer,'" Nelson explained, "in his own image, or one of them: cold, immaculate, sterile, 'scientific,' oppressive" (2). In addition,

> public thinking about computers is heavily tinged by a peculiar image which we may call the Myth of the Machine. It goes as follows: there is something called the Machine, which is Taking Over The World. According to this point of view The Machine is a relentless, peremptory, repetitive, invariable, monotonous, inexorable, implacable, ruthless, inhuman, dehumanizing, impersonal Juggernaut brainlessly carrying out repetitive (and often violent) actions (9).

Elsewhere, a defense of computers posited by J.C.R. Licklider, writing in 1968, begins by outlining the same myth. "For many," he noted,

> the computer is a cold, precise machine that lives behind a glass wall, a machine intolerant of the slightest error in the thick decks of punched cards it receives, indifferent to the reading habits of those to whom it presents great stacks of printout paper full of capital letters, and on the whole best dealt with not more often than once a day, and then through its

> retinue of intermediaries—its programmers, keypunch operators, dispatchers, computer operators, and field engineers (275).

Although the descriptions by Nelson and Licklider refer to the computers of the historical world—and historically specific perceptions of these machines—they might just as well be describing the fictional Alpha 60, with its white-coated programmers and myriad engineers, the equivalent of the technical experts whose status is elevated to a shadowy elite in Ellul's technological society. Where Nelson conceptualized the computer as a "dream machine" (DM1-DM59), which might take on as many forms and functions as the human imagination could conceive, the computer of Alphaville is monolithic, the material manifestation of the ideology that gave rise to it, and which it now perpetuates.

Poetry, in particular, is portrayed as the epitome of human expression—again, defined in contrast to the computer—a means of reclaiming language in a society of overwhelming semantic control. Poetry, a form both expressive and affecting, offers the exquisite crystallization of emotion. Indeed, it is poetry—Paul Éluard's *Capitale de la douleur* [*Capital of Pain*]—that the fading Dickson hands to Caution as a weapon.[8] We see several scenes of Caution reading from this text, and it is Éluard's words, coupled with Caution's expressions of love, that eventually rouse Natasha from her emotional slumber.

In terms of related discourse, Marcuse outlined his own critique of a society in which technology functions to dehumanize, the antithesis of poetry and other forms of art, which he took to represent freedom. His ideal, addressing a sense of entrapment that is not specific to technology—though technology was identified as a contributing factor in the creation of "one-dimensional man" (1964) and a society enslaved despite its apparent prosperity (1969)—was a world in which art is so fully integrated with existence that the two are impossible to separate. "The liberated consciousness," he wrote,

> would promote the development of a science and technology free to discover and realize the possibilities of things and men in the protection and gratification of life, playing with the potentialities of form and matter for the attainment of this goal. Technique would then tend to become art, and art would tend to form reality: the opposition between imagination

> and reason, higher and lower faculties, poetic and scientific thought, would be invalidated (1969, 24).

This idealistic vision stood in stark contrast to what Marcuse saw as the loss of freedom to industrial society, which was in turn at the service of capital. “The industrial society which makes technology and science its own,” he wrote, “is organized for the ever-more-effective utilization of its resources” (1964, 17). Describing the type of logic paralleled by the rule of Alpha 60, Marcuse noted how, “the technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests—to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible” (9).

In *Alphaville*, according to the binary opposition at work in the historically specific myth concerning the computer, the essentially human, in contrast to this machine, is identified most explicitly in the capacity to feel, the emotive expressions of language, the ideological and metaphysical questioning of existence, and acts of impulse and desire.

Humanity in the “Capital of Pain”

Ultimately, the distinction that *Alphaville* draws between human and computer is located in the related realms of consciousness and conscience. By exploiting fundamental differences in these areas, Caution triumphs over Alpha 60 and Professor von Braun, destroying Alphaville in the process.

This climax is anticipated by Caution’s interrogation by Alpha 5, one of Alpha 60’s complex of computer units. He is asked a series of probing, abstract questions—”What transforms the night into the day?” “What is your religion?” “Is there a difference between the mystery of the laws of knowledge and those of love?”—designed to function as an ideological evaluation. It is “poetry,” Caution responds, that illuminates the night; his religion, we discover, is based upon “immediate inspirations of my conscience”; while love, in contrast to the principles of knowledge, is regarded as “no mystery.”

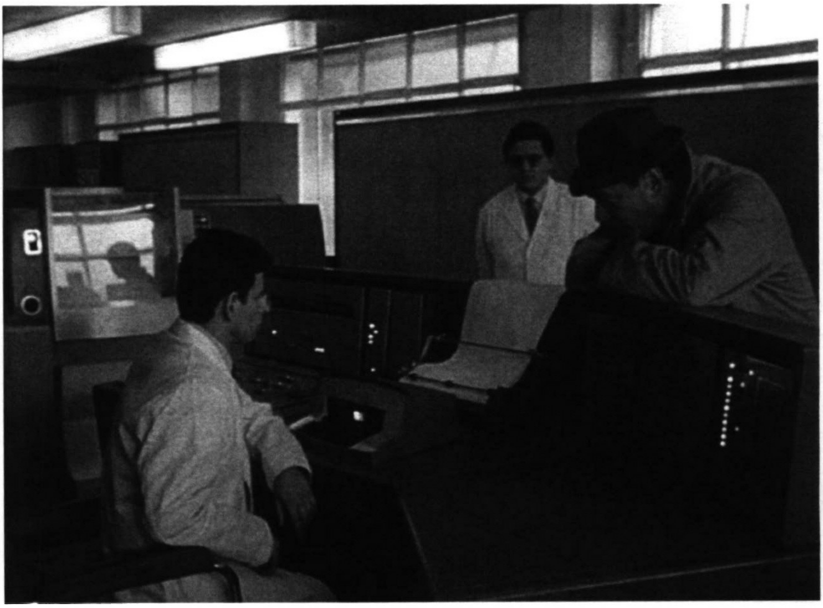
This defense of poetry, conscience, and love amounts to a direct challenge to the ideology of Alphaville. Indeed, this scene reveals the core of a humanist critique—a manifesto of sorts, which outlines the qualities and expressions that exemplify the essence of humanity and offer a means of resistance to its proposed subordination—of the parallel societies of Alphaville, most obviously, in terms of fiction, and the increasingly technological society of Paris, in the historical world, by implication and refraction.

Like those who were executed, Caution renounces the society that uses computers to constrain humanity. "I do refuse to become what you call normal," he decries. This humanist position is expressed less equivocally in another of Caution's conversations with the computer. "You can go and stuff yourself with your bloody Logic!" he remarks at one stage, a sentiment that might equally encapsulate the various positions of Ellul, Mumford, or Marcuse. When the computer orders Caution to consent to form part of "a superior race ... to normal men" or be "eliminated," a scenario described as being "for the Universal Good," the secret agent unleashes his most powerful weapon.

This "secret," as Caution terms it, is an enigmatic riddle that points to the core of humanity as the means for the ultimate destruction of Mumford's "technics," Ellul's "la technique," and so on. The answer, which exists beyond the circuitry of any computer, is described as "something that never changes with the night or the day, as long as the past represents the future, towards which it will advance in a straight line, but which, at the end, has closed in on itself into a circle." If, Caution continues, the computer were ever to realize the answer to this riddle, which it does by the close of the film, "you will destroy yourself in the process ... because you will have become my equal, my brother." In other words, computers such as Alpha 60, "who are not born ... do not weep ... and do not regret," will either cease to function, having achieved the inspiration of conscience that Caution defines as his religion, or implode in denial as the ultimate expression of the computer's internal logic, short-circuiting as it thinks like a human in order to solve the puzzle.

Having dealt with Alpha 60, Caution next confronts Professor von Braun, denouncing the technician who perfected this machine. "You are opposing my moral and even supernatural sense of vocation, with nothing more than a physical and mental existence created and dictated by technocracy," he explains, before killing the arch technocrat. "Such people," Caution continues, "will serve as terrible examples to all those who use the world as their theatre, where technical power and its religion become the Rules of the Game."

One of the film's most significant scenes sees the ultimate stirring of Natasha's resistance to this technical power and its technological manifestation. The antidote to this world exists in the redemptive power of poetry, which is further represented as the quintessence of human impulses and endeavors. Through Éluard's *Capitale de la douleur* ("Are we close to, or far away from our conscience?"; "I am as much alive as my love and my despair"), Caution stirs in Natasha the human qualities she has all but forgotten in the course of assimilation. In undoing this process, Caution teaches Natasha the meaning of the words "conscience" and "love." She repeats the refrain of the executed resistor—"To live, only advance! Aim straight for those you love"—and, as she takes tentative steps toward a new lexicon of redemptive humanity, "I ... love ... you ... I love you."



Agent Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine) watched over by white-coated computer technician

Through the humanizing power of emotion, Natasha is transformed into someone who is free to think and feel; to be, in other words, human. The destruction of Alphaville, whose inhabitants are stricken in a swoon of despair, is signified by the flickering oscillation between positive and negative imagery, an effect that recalls the flashing light of Alpha 60. In the face of the dehumanizing impulse of technocracy, aligned with the processing power of the computer, this threat is defused by one simple phrase—"I love you"—that the machine, in this mythologized representation, can never understand.

Conclusion

At a time of renewed faith in the technological society, facilitated by the proliferation of the computer and associated ways of thinking and being, *Alphaville* brought into focus the fundamental question of how we reconcile, if at all, the respective qualities associated with humans and computers. Only through emotion and creative inspiration, Godard's film suggests, can human beings make intellectual and spiritual progress; without this element of humanity, we too are machines.

Although not typically thought of as a humanist, and necessarily implicated in technics by virtue of his profession—a complex relationship with technology that recurs throughout the director's career—Godard admonished a world in which those who are "beyond codification" (93), evoking the terminology associated with the transmutation of the world into the underlying binary language of the digital computer, are deemed illogical, aberrant, and in need of assimilation.

This dystopian theme of humanity being dominated by machines is not necessarily new, of course; the notion of intelligent machines that transcend the computational power of the human brain has been explored in numerous films and continues to be a staple of science fiction, while the universal nature of the conflict between humans and machines is implicit in Godard's reference to Tarzan's fantasy battle with IBM, played out by Caution and Alpha 60.

Yet, Godard's exploration of the relationship between humans and machines is also framed according to the distinctive symbolic presence of the computer and its evolving status at a particular historical juncture. This technology provided a variation on the theme of humanity's subjugation by machines. In reworking this notion for the digital age, *Alphaville* revealed the Gamma 60—in its refracted guise of the fictional Alpha 60—to be a source of considerable threat at a time when the computer was perceived by many as bringing us one step closer to a soulless technocracy. In projecting this inversion of the typical master-slave relationship, Godard's film reveals as much about the specific context of the mid-1960s as it does about the future era it ostensibly depicts.

Specifically, in magnifying contemporary attitudes and anxieties, *Alphaville* resonates with the philosophical discourse of the time, negotiating through sound and image the ideas central to the humanist critiques of technology espoused by Ellul, Mumford, Marcuse, and others, while arriving at his own distinctive position. Godard emerges as a resistor to blind faith in technology, not unlike the dissident poets of his fictional future, but one who draws on the expressive potential of cinema, a form necessarily rooted in technology. The Paris of the 1960s becomes the "capital of pain," a society of technological alienation, which can only be saved through a renewed faith in love, poetry, and individual liberty—qualities, for Godard, that are antithetical to the computer as technocratic tool, but are not beyond the technics of cinema.

Notes

[1] A connection suggested by Cournot.

[2] For a detailed history, see Bataille.

[3] See Richard Roud's introduction (10) to Godard's screenplay.

[4] Here and elsewhere, translations are from Peter Whitehead's English translation of Godard's screenplay.

[5] For a general history of computing, see Ceruzzi.

[6] As one early example, see Rosenthal.

[7] In countless novels, films, and television series following Burroughs' original.

[8] For a detailed study of Godard's use of Éluard's poetry, see Martin.

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